



## Born to set thy people free

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

### Readings: Isaiah 35.1-10; Matthew 11.2-11

What is the point of being a Christian? There must be times when all of us doubt? And it is reassuring to know from our Gospel passage today, that even John the Baptist had his doubts. Here is a man who has staked his life on honesty, spoken out against the corruption of his time, given everything to follow what he believes to be God's calling, even lived wearing camel hair, eating locusts and wild honey, which can't have been much fun. He has quite selflessly pointed his own disciples to Jesus, and now he is legitimately questioning whether he has not got it all wrong. Now he is in prison and he can see the writing is on the wall and, not surprisingly, the doubt has set in. Has he been following the right person? He sends his messengers to ask "Are you the one who is to come?" It is a legitimate question. If we are to be faithful to Christ, surely there must be some proof that we are not totally misguided and that we are not following a personal fantasy. This question seems especially urgent when we ourselves are up against it. When we have prayed and prayed for an outcome and the result has gone against us, or prayed and prayed for a healing or for help and that healing or help has not come. Yesterday, Paul Lau came into the church office rejoicing. He had been praying with one of his congregation who had just become a Christian and he had just heard news that this person had been healed. I said "what wonderful news", but in my heart I felt how can this be true? I wonder how many prayers were offered by those Christians who were recently killed while in church in Iraq. John the Baptist has every reason to doubt whether Jesus is really the liberator, because he is in prison and it is only three chapters before he will lose his head, which will be served up on a platter. He is certainly not in a good place! I think it is quite understandable that he wants some answers. Is it worth it? Is this the one who will really set them free? Is it worth following this Jesus Christ? Or would we not be better off just getting on with life, forgetting all about this grand deception.

The dilemma of how seriously we should trust our faith is central to a most powerful film which has just opened in London, 'Of Gods and Men'. Directed by Xavier Beauvois it won the Grand Jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival. The film tells the story of eight Cistercian monks living in community in their monastery in the Atlas mountains in Algeria in 1996. This is a film which has a deep simplicity and wisdom and I encourage you to see it. Cinema is usually about dynamism, attraction, ego, but this movie concerns the renunciation of these things; it is about faith and calling.

The film begins by establishing the routine and of these monks' lives. We see their vocation to prayer, work and service, farming the land, bottling honey to sell at the nearby market. One of the eldest and gentlest of monks, Luc, holds clinics and draws pictures of the sun and moon on envelopes to remind the villagers when they must take the medicine he has given them. We watch his great care, and the tenderness with which he cleanses the flesh of one of the Islamic militants who has been wounded, as though he were ministering to the beauty of Christ himself. We hear the monks singing and praying together with great devotion and interacting undemonstratively and with deep compassion within the life of the village, mixing easily and respectfully with the Arab Muslim population. When Brother Christian is confronted by Islamists carrying Kalashnikovs on Christmas Eve, Christian ends up quoting the Qur'an to express the relationship between Christians and Muslims and the insurgent leader finishes the quotation and leaves peacefully, as the monks celebrate their Christmas liturgy. The film begins with news reaching them of the brutal murder of Croatian workers on a construction project by these same Islamic insurgents who have slit their

throats. This is a film about the confrontation between faith which is respectful, quiet and compassionate, and the brutal intolerant world view of both the government and jihadists. It is a film for our times. The monks' lives in the monastery become increasingly uncertain as they are caught in between the demands of these insurgents on one side and the corrupt military government, trying to root out the terrorists, on the other. The dilemma for the monks is should they stay, as their lives become increasingly threatened, or should they leave for their own safety, as events escalate? It is a brilliant examination of the nature of faith and vocation, when the cost of this vocation becomes increasingly obvious.

Brother Christian, the leader of the community, is outspoken and convinced they must stay, but his brothers, who at first he has not consulted, are more nervous, and quite legitimately afraid. What is the point of getting themselves murdered? What purpose would that serve? And yet, how could they leave the village community behind whose love and trust they have won? As a helicopter hovers overhead, its blades shrieking, the monks sing their Office, clinging to each other for courage. In a powerful last supper, they play a recording of Swan Lake on a cassette recorder; as they drink wine together, the camera moves in close up from face to face of these vulnerable old monks. There is so much humanity in each of these faces. How can they act when challenged by violence? How can they face the reality of the danger they are in while remaining true to their vocation and to one another? How can they still be true to a Gospel of love to neighbour when, so defenceless, they face the reality of their own mortality and death? The film shows us the moment of decision when faith will cost nothing less than everything. These are not superheroes, they are just people, ordinary people, like us: like a loved grandfather, like a friend with a terminal illness, facing fear and yet longing to live with integrity to God and to one another. "What is love like?" one of the monks is asked by a local Muslim woman. "It is an attraction, a desire, a quickening of the spirits, an intensification of life itself." Have we not all experienced or longed for that?

So what does Jesus answer when John the Baptist faces his imprisonment and the prospect of his own death and sends word to Jesus' disciples – "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answers "Go and tell John what you hear and see, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." I think of Brother Luc in the film, meticulously dispensing medicine. I also think of Ann Oakes-Odger, from KnifeCrimes.Org, and others at the memorial service yesterday; for families and friends of those bereaved by homicide who lost a loved one, and now have devoted their lives to bringing help and support to others. I think of Sohaila Jalinousnia, a Muslim Traffic Control Engineer, who at the Wednesday night Transport for London Carol service, read from the Qur'an, and invited the congregation to join in a prayer for peace and wrote to me to say what a huge privilege it was to take part in this Christian celebration of Christmas. I think of the team of volunteers working on this year's Christmas Appeal. I think of the person who sent three pairs of shoes after hearing the appeal on the radio and a cheque for £350.

The only way to understand Christ's answer for John the Baptist, is to recognise the same good news in our own lives. It is the realisation that, here in our own humanity, is the presence of God, and the miracle of the gentle liberating power of love and compassion. Look carefully into your own life, for it is so easily overlooked, taken for granted, passed over as nothing. Notice how the saving power of God's love and goodness often do not take place centre stage, or in the glare of the spotlight. The Kingdom begins as small as a mustard seed; as frail, as human and as vulnerable as these eight aging monks; or a mother's love for her son who suffered a brain haemorrhage after being struck on the head in the student demonstrations last week, and the ambulance team who managed to get him to hospital. You may easily think it is nothing, that this good news has no power. But it has all power. It holds the power of our redemption and our salvation. It is the liberating power of God's love, seemingly inconsequential, and yet of all consequence. At its heart is love, the intensification of life itself.

In mortal danger, John the Baptist is called to recognise the greatest truth of all, the liberating power of Jesus' love, a love greater even than life itself. What this Jesus Christ offers is not a rescue, like the exodus, from an evil situation, not an escape, but salvation in and through the struggles of our lives, confronting both pain and evil and witnessing to God's love even there. The imitation of Christ is the bearing of the struggle, carrying it, and in Christ, transforming it. Our broken humanity is the raw material from which our new humanity arises. This new humanity is born not in the palaces of power but in the stable. Let us take this message of Advent away with us: a child will be born in a manger, and this excluded one will welcome you, all of you. Even that, of which you are ashamed, is welcomed here. Because this stable is the place where the beauty and hope of our humanity is born. This stable is the place where the inside of you can come out and be healed, and where those who are outside can come in to God's love. The stable is going to be the place of the greatest of all transformations.

Ylva Eggehorn writes:

'Stand still in the pain,  
Rooted in that in you which is light.  
Let the sword go through you.  
Maybe it is not a sword at all  
Maybe it is a tuning fork.  
You become a note.  
You become the music you always longed to hear  
You didn't know that you were the song.'

This vulnerable Christ-child seems a hopelessly inadequate answer to the fears and dangers we all face. But this Christ-child, this Good News, is also everything... everything that is eternal.

Come thou long expected Jesus born to set thy people free.